

Exercising your Imagination

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I had a conversation recently with a woman at a gallery that was showing my paintings and sculpture. It was typical of many such conversations with people who have seen my work. “You are so lucky to have been blessed with an imagination,” she said. “I have no imagination at all. I can’t think up anything!” This was followed by the question most frequently asked: “Where do you get your ideas?” That question is often accompanied by “Golly, would I like to peek into your dreams!”

These comments, repeated often as I talk with folks about my work, set me thinking. Where do I get my ideas? How does one “think up” things? Where does inspiration come from? I have never had a problem thinking things up and since childhood have had a very active imagination. But how does it work? It certainly does not come from my dreams. I have only once painted a dream, and it was only afterward that I realized that the idea for the work came from a dream I had many years before.

It seems that many adults see imagination and creativity as something reserved for artists, writers, and other “creative” types. But I don’t agree with that. I believe that everyone has an imagination, everyone has the potential to be creative. I think that the process comes more easily to some folks, but with practice we all have access to imagination and creative problem solving, no matter where our interests and talents lie.

As I thought about how imagination works, I came up with the metaphor of a card catalogue in a library. Now I know that most of you use Byline in the library, but the cards are still there and I want you to work with me here. Rows and rows of little drawers filled with thousands and thousands of little cards—that is what our mind is like. When we are born, the catalogue is filled with mostly empty cards. Each card in the catalogue represents a single thought or idea that is stored in our minds. We fill out the cards through our six senses. Everything that we see, touch, hear, smell, taste, and sense through inspiration or intuition creates a card or a group of cards. When we are children, we fill out cards like crazy! The world is a fascinating place, and we have no inhibitions about exploring, learning, and experiencing. Everything in our lives feeds the card catalogue. We freely experiment with the ideas we are collecting and have little problem making strange connections and unique leaps of logic. We have an entire world of images, objects, and experiences to add to our catalogue. Firsthand experiences are best—strong and immediate. But with the explosion of technology and communication, we can access places, cultures, images, and ideas that we might never experience firsthand. This gathering of information, this building of a card catalogue, is the first requisite of imagination. The bigger our card catalogue is, the more potential for imaginative thinking we have.

But *how* do we think things up? I submit that the process of imagination is nothing more than the combining of cards in your card catalogue in new and unique ways. Nothing comes from nothing. Every original thought is based on information that we already have in our card catalogue. Whether by a methodical process or by sheer serendipity, all new ideas come from the

combination of existing concepts put together in ways that no one has ever done before. That's how imagination works.

So what slows us down? Why would that lady in the gallery say to me that she has no imagination? Here is the problem: I believe that many people are stuck in thinking ruts. As we grow up, we learn certain patterns of thought. We find solutions that work, which we repeat again and again. Some of these patterns are good and allow us to function. It's a good thing that we don't have to invent or relearn how to use silverware every time we sit down to eat. Many of the habits we have help us to get through the day efficiently. It is good that we can do this. But unfortunately, too many of us, in the routine of our lives, allow too many thinking ruts to develop, and we seem to lose the ability to get out of those ruts to find original solutions. As life takes over, our imaginations atrophy, like any muscle that is not exercised. After a while, many of us would echo the comment of the lady in the gallery, "I don't have an imagination." My declaration to you today is "Yes, you do have an imagination. Yes, you do have the capacity to dream, to invent, to create, to think things up!" You just need to exercise your imagination in the same way you exercise your muscles. And the more you exercise, the easier it becomes to be creative.

If you find yourself fishing out of the same bucket for ideas, perhaps it's time to find a bigger bucket—or at least put a few new fish in the bucket you have! So the first step to richer creative thinking is to build a bigger card file. Read, travel, observe, walk, hike, have conversations with new people, make notes, listen, inhale, study, take advantage of every opportunity to add to your card catalogue. And don't just add more of the same stuff. Reach out for things that are less familiar, a little outside of your comfort zone. Be willing to take a few risks and try new things and ideas. These new cards, collected firsthand or vicariously, will trigger new thoughts and add to your creative potential.

This system is not limited to visual data. The composer Kurt Bestor and I have worked on a few projects together. We were sitting on the deck behind his house on the Provo River one warm summer evening a couple of years ago, planning the *Evening Angels* album, comparing notes on how we work and where we get our ideas, and I was talking about my card catalogue, when he held up his hand and said, "Listen." I listened and heard the noise of a hundred humming, whistling, chirping, clicking, croaking critters, on top of the gentle sound of the river. "That's where I find my ideas. That's where I fill out my cards." As we listened, he began to hum and to tap his fingers in an interesting rhythm, picking out the syncopated pattern of one sound on top of another. Those sounds and rhythms, he explained, become inspiration, points of departure for his music. It was fascinating for me to learn that this musician shared my ideas about how imagination works. The main difference in our analogies for the process is that, as he points out, being much younger and more hip than I am, he thinks of the process in terms of data stored in a computer rather than in a primitive card catalogue. He is probably right—at least about the younger part.

Nor are we the originators of the idea of filling out file cards, or inputting data, and combining them in original ways to imagine new ideas. While visiting a friend's studio, I found this quote tacked on his wall. It is attributed to Sir Joshua Reynolds, the 18th- century English painter.

It is indisputably evident that a great part of every man's life must be employed in collecting materials for the exercise of genius. Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory: nothing can come of nothing: he who has laid up no materials can produce no combinations.

So the process takes shape and becomes less magical and mystical. You must train your mind to think creatively. To begin with, you must be aware of what goes on around you. Document your experiences. Keep a journal or a scrapbook. Because I think visually, my journal is a sketchbook with notes. When I travel, I make a lot of journal entries, along with drawings and on-the-spot sketches. These may never turn into paintings, but they help me remember and identify new experiences. I prefer to record my impressions with drawings, but if you don't draw, write your observations down, make notes to trigger your memory. If you don't have a way with words, augment your written observations with photographs to capture thoughts and impressions. I am a compulsive doodler. I draw all the time. I think that it started when I was very young and my father was in the bishopric and had to sit on the stand. My mother was often ill, and I went to church with my dad and had to sit alone. My dad would always give me a notepad and a pencil and tell me to be quiet and draw. It worked. I still draw in church. I listen better when I draw, and I never know when a good idea is going to present itself based on something the speaker has said.

While many of the drawings in my sketchbook are observations of people and places, drawn from life, much of my sketchbook contains imaginary stuff. These drawings illustrate the idea I have been talking about of combining cards in your file in new and different, perhaps unexpected ways. Sometimes the combinations are simple transpositions of combinations of objects. Sometimes they illustrate an idea or concept that I am trying to work out. Often one idea leads to another. That is one of the fascinating things about the process of imagination. It picks up momentum, one idea leading to another. Here, for example, a drawing of a picaresque character with a peg leg led to some thoughts on early experiments with prosthetics. Many of the combinations won't work, and a lot of ideas are only important in that they lead to other ideas that eventually lead to something that might be significant.

Let me show you a couple of examples of how this process works: I love costume. I like the patterns. I like the layers and textures and the busyness of certain historical periods. So I study old art, engravings, costume and design books, and other historical references. I build up my card catalogue with lots of costume ideas and information. Then when I do a painting, I design my own catalogue with lots of costume ideas and information. Then when I do a painting, I design my own costumes based on, but not copying, the material I have studied. The result is never historically accurate, but tends to be much more interesting to me than merely copying. I am also fascinated with armor. I like the shapes and the connections, the decoration and elaboration. Whenever I travel, I try to visit any museum that has an armor collection. I study and draw the armor and then later recreate it in my sketchbook. But the farther I get from the actual armor, the more my imagination takes over and the more unreal the drawings become. I also have a bug collection. These are not scientifically important bugs; they just really look neat. I study them and draw them and store them in my card catalogue. Then, when I least expect it, a drawing comes out that combines the aspects of armor with the spiny carapaces of insects. And the person

sitting next to me in whatever meeting it was exclaimed, “What an imagination you’ve got! You just made that up!” But you can see that I only sort of made it up. This can be a labored process and a true struggle, or it can be as easy as falling off a log. Einstein said: “As one grows older, one sees the impossibility of imposing your will on the chaos with brute force. But if you are patient, there may come that moment when, while eating an apple, the solution presents itself politely and says, ‘Here I am.’”

In her book *Walking on Water*, Madelaine L’Engle reminds us that while we can never predict when that moment of true inspiration will come, we must work constantly to be ready when that magic moment presents itself and be prepared to recognize it and take advantage of it.

I believe we can make these creative connections best when our minds are allowed to meander a little, when we are not assailed with the myriad messages and concerns of everyday life. How many of us get great ideas in the shower or on walks? I find that I think of solutions to problems, write the best talks, and get the best ideas for paintings in that twilight, half-awake state between sleep and wakefulness in the morning. If I have gone to bed thinking about a painting I am trying to finish or begin and go to sleep thinking about it, I often find possible solutions as I awake in the morning. Sometimes I will set my alarm half an hour before I have to get up, so that I can doze and think, dream and ponder the possibilities of potential solutions. Faculty meetings and church sometimes provide the same opportunity.

May I take a moment here for a parenthetical insertion, which is also a major plug for the arts? (I hope that all the administrators at this university are listening.) In addition to offering pure enjoyment and delight, the musical, theatrical, literary, and visual arts are the gymnasium of the imagination. The fine arts not only offer limitless new cards for our files but stimulate us to make new combinations, to puzzle out meaning, and to exercise our “What if . . .” muscles. Sometimes art suggests answers, presents information in new ways or from a different point of view. Sometimes it frames or defines a problem while offering insights into other people’s explorations that we can use as points of departure for our own creative thinking. The arts are not dessert after a serious, technological, real-life meal but an important course in a well-balanced intellectual diet.

One of my goals as a visual artist is to provide the “exercise equipment” for others to strengthen their imaginations. While much of my work has specific meaning and direction for me, I enjoy painting works that do not necessarily explain themselves. I do not insist that the viewer divine my exact meaning for a given work. Each of you, looking at one of my paintings, will bring a unique set of life experiences, a head full of cards that you have filled out over a lifetime. We will have some cards in common, but your experiences will have given you very different cards than mine. With a little effort, you will find your own meaning in my work that is valid for you and much more important for your life than my meanings. If it is of primary importance for me to communicate a specific message or feeling with my work of art, then it is my responsibility to give you clues that allow you access to the meaning of the work. The beauty of most art is that it allows more than one interpretation, based on the experience of the viewer. I have often told the story of how this idea was sent home to me when I was talking to a group of second or third graders. I had talked to them about trusting themselves to interpret art, to find meanings for themselves and not worry too much about what the artist intended. I showed them this painting

entitled *Lawrence Pretended Not to Notice That a Bear Had Become Attached to His Coattail*. I painted this work at a time in my life when I was faced with adversity, and I was coming to terms with how I was handling it. This character emerged in my sketchbook and gave me much food for thought. I found that many people identified with Lawrence, and the smile it brought helped them face their problems. But when I asked the schoolchildren what they thought the painting was about, a very anxious, pigtailed little moppet responded enthusiastically, “You should never take pets home to your mom without asking!” And that was *exactly* what that painting was about—for that little girl! With her set of file cards, that painting carried a message that was much more important to her than any of my metaphorical thinking about dealing with problems.

By playing with ideas and imagination through art, writing, telling stories, playing games, or creative daydreaming, we increase our ability to think things up. I suspect that most of you have played the game at some time or another where one person starts a story, takes it so far, and then passes it on to the next person at a strategic moment. It’s a lot of fun, and very unexpected turns of events happen as we exercise our imaginations. I taught art at a junior high school in California for a few years after college, and one of the assignments to stretch the imagination of my students was “One Hundred and One things to Do with an Alligator.” We would brainstorm the hundred-plus uses for alligators, record the ideas, and then illustrate them. It has always been interesting to watch the students go at it. First we would do the obvious, from shoes to handbags, and then we would get a little creative and put them in movies or in show biz. But after 15 or 20 suggestions, everything slowed down. Then someone would come up with some wacky idea like making skis out of them or entering one in a beauty contest, and the momentum picked up. Once the students got the idea that any combination of cards was possible and *acceptable*, their minds opened up, and we couldn’t write down the possibilities fast enough. But even by junior high school, these students had to push themselves through the process and give themselves permission to get a little crazy and off the wall in order to relearn how to make things up.

It is hard work to start up an engine that hasn’t been run in years. It is hard to develop a workout routine if you haven’t exercised in a long time. But the benefits of exercise and conditioning are obvious and almost immediate, whether we are conditioning our bodies or our imaginations. Imagination is available to everyone. We can all be creative if we are willing to pay the price, as there is a price to be paid for any success. We must study and observe. We must be willing to experiment. We must allow ourselves to be comfortable with flights of fancy and exploratory thinking. We must move out of our comfort zone into the unknown territory of “What if . . .” We all have the ability to imagine. We all have the potential to extend our thinking limits, to get out of our thinking ruts, to *create*, for are we not made in the image of the greatest Creator of all? It is my hope and prayer that we can each find and exercise our creative potential.

